

The Failure of the American Dream in Fitzgerald's Novel "The Great Gatsby"



Literature

Keywords: American dream, American society, Gatsby, Fitzgerald, etc.

Ahmed Jasim

English Department. Cihan University. Iraq.

Abstract

The American Dream is the main theme of *The Great Gatsby*. This research paper shows the failure of the American dream especially after the World War I. Many dreams appeared in the American society. The people start to achieve these dreams without paying attention to the rules of the life and moral values. According to my selected novel, the failure of the American dream can be presented in the main character (Gatsby). He gives up his moral values and the rules of life just to achieve his dream. The dream of getting marriage to the woman who loves her (Daisy) ends with failure. Each character wants to chase his/her dream in different ways.

The central idea of this research is what based on false, cannot be true. The dream might be achieved, but it lasts for short time. In case of Gatsby, he makes his dream by illegal way, without following the rules of life and humanity. Everyone has a dream but how to achieve that dream is the main issue which this research focuses on it. That dream either be achieved or failed. Throughout the novel, there is a clear notice that the writer has given a background of the American society of that time. It is also clear that the experiences of the writer's life mention in his novel.

The researcher aims to find out how the people struggle to achieve their dreams. Since we live in an era of challenges which make a lot of obstacles to make someone struggle to achieve his/her dream. Therefore, this research will focus on how people chase their dreams especially after World War I. In addition to that the research will suggest some solutions on how to solve these obstacles, and to make the dreams come true.

Overview

As America has developed, its citizens have struggled to define and capture the American dream. The great Gatsby was written by Scott Fitzgerald. Throughout the novel the author presents the American dream by Gatsby. He is the hero of the novel who struggles to achieve the American dream.

The Great Gatsby is a 1925 novel written by American author F. Scott Fitzgerald. It focuses on the failure of the American Dream. The basic quality of the American Dream described in the novel is the hope for something to reach your idealistic goal. For Jay Gatsby, his dream is to win back the love of Daisy, the perfect woman of his dream. He sacrifices his honesty in order to get rich by involving in illegal business. Gatsby does everything just to become a rich man and achieve his dream. The American dream means achieving success despite of the chances, but Gatsby's circumstance is different. He doesn't follow the rules of humanity in achieving his goal. The American dream means making a lot of success through honesty and hard work, but the main character of the novel does his goal by involving in an illegal way and cheating. The pitiless chase of wealth leads to the corruption of human nature and moral values.

Gatsby never achieves the American dream because his whole worth bases on a fake story. He makes his own worth by lying and cheating. He dines the real meaning in humanity in achieving his goals. He also doesn't achieve success as himself. Gatsby himself is a complete lie, and how can a lie be a success story. Therefore his behavior is against the meaning of American dream.

Fitzgerald uses characters in the novel to show the corruptions of the American Dream. He loses the humanity and honesty which should be in achieving the American dream. The whole dream is based on the fake story. The dream which supposes to be achieved with honesty and moral but Gatsby doesn't follow the rules of honesty. Fitzgerald shows the failure of the dream especially at the end of the novel when Gatsby dies.

Throughout the novel, the author shows another meaning of achieving the American dream is that the approval of society. In Gatsby's case, the society doesn't accept Gatsby. The people treat him as a tool to enjoy themselves through his huge parties. The reason of attendance his parties just to have fun. They just use him to achieve their goals. They even don't respect him; some say that he is smuggler and bootlegger. At the end of novel when he dies, they don't attend his funeral; even don't ask how he dies.

"He's a bootlegger...One time he killed a man who had found out that he..." (p.g61)

The great Gatsby represents a criticism of American experience of basic historic attitude of life. In the novel, the reality of the American dream ends and the illusion begins. The allusion of some characters is to achieve specific purposes. Each character in the novel follows a specific dream. The main dream is Gatsby's dream. He chases the illusion of love, the love which never achieves. The Great Gatsby is an explanation as it exists in a corrupt period and it is an attempt to determine that hidden boundary that divides the reality from the illusion. The illusion seems more real than the reality itself. It present in the secondary characters in the novel. People can seem better in dreams than reality. The allusion of the people expect a perfect life, but the reality is there are kinds of crime, murder and lying .On the other hand the reality is represented in Gatsby. It is a thing of spirit rather than the possession of vision. 1

Each character has a different dream. Gatsby's dream is to achieve his goal which represented by Daisy's love. Gatsby hopes to win Daisy back. He has an "extraordinary gift of hope"(p6, 10) and he sacrifices himself to fulfill his dream. For the past five years, Gatsby sees Daisy as the perfect woman, someone that Daisy could be,

No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what man will store up in his ghostly heart"(pg. 101)

Gatsby is disappointed that the woman he loves is not really who he wants her to be. Gatsby wants a better life and he thinks he can do it if he puts his mind to it, which is also a part of the American Dream. However, Gatsby's dream fails when he fails to win Daisy. All his money cannot help him when old man Wilson fires a gun at him. Gatsby sees himself as a failure when Daisy chooses Tom instead of him. The failure of Gatsby's hoped for life relates to the failure of the American Dream. Without his dream Gatsby has nothing, nothing to keep him going, no direction, and no purpose to live.2

He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: I never loved you. After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken" (pg.109).3

The failure of the American dream can be embodied in the behavior of the woman. Woman before the novel's time is more family oriented and very strict in her behavior, but Daisy is the opposite. Daisy is very immoral even when they had no business to be because she is married. Through the novel, Daisy's behavior presents her ambition to achieve the American dream.³ Nick Carraway is a realistic man, who comes from the Middle-West, and does not share the American dream. But still he is struggling for something; he wants to be himself, as he sees himself, tolerant, objective and reliable. Mainly, his dream consists of mental values, of a pursuit of honesty. He says of himself

"I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (pg.49).⁴

For Daisy Buchanan, her dream is to reach a higher standard of living and to become very rich even though she has to pay the price of betraying her own heart. The failure of the American dream can be embodied in the behavior of Daisy. It can be said that the behavior of Woman differs from the woman before the First World War. The woman before the war is more family oriented and very strict in her behavior, but in Daisy's time is the opposite. Daisy is very immoral even when they had no business to be because she is married. Through the novel, Daisy's behavior presents her ambition to achieve the American dream without paying attention to the moral values and the politeness of modern society.

Wilson also hopes to achieve his American dream. He wants to earn money and live a new life with his wife. But his dream can just become true with the help of Tom. He asks his friend (Tom) to help him to achieve his dream. He tries different ways to chase his dream but they are useless. Although, Wilson does not realize that Tom does not want to help him at all. His dream fails, when his wife is killed.

Myrtle has also a dream; she wants to become a girl of the upper class. Having an affair with Tom, she acts as if she already belonged among those rich people. Tom is her key to the upper class and she would do everything for him. She hates Daisy, because Daisy is standing in her way, for her marriage with Tom.

Though Myrtle Wilson makes an attempt to escape her own class and pursue happiness with the rich, she ends up gaining nothing and eventually dies. She is basically a victim of the group she wanted to join. Myrtle tries to become like Tom by having an affair with him and taking on his way of living, but in doing so she becomes unsatisfied with her life. Her constant clothing changes show that she is unhappy with her life; she changes personalities every time she changes her dress.

"With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur" (pg.30).

All the characters try to become happier with their lives. The characters in the novel are divided into two groups: the rich upper class and the poorer lower class though the main characters only try to make their lives better.

Tom and Daisy Buchanan belong to the rich upper class. They are able to have everything they want. Though their lives are full of anything you could imagine, they are unhappy and seek to change. Daisy is an empty character. Even before her relationships with Tom or, Gatsby are seen, Daisy does nothing but sits around all day and wonders what to do with herself and her friend Jordan. She knows that Tom is having an affair, yet she doesn't leave him even when she hears about Gatsby loving her. Daisy lets Gatsby know that she too is in love with him but can't bring herself to tell Tom goodbye except when Gatsby forces her too. Even then, once Tom begs her to stay, even then Daisy forever leaves Gatsby for her old life of comfort. Daisy and Tom are perfect examples of wealth and fortune, and the American Dream. Yet their lives are empty, and without purpose.

"They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made..." (pg.179).

Myrtle and Wilson belong to the lower class. They also want to achieve their dreams. They live in a poor place which refers to the poverty. Myrtle uses Tom to achieve her dream and to reach to the upper class. Wilson wants to change his life and starts a new life with his wife (Myrtle) but his dream fails.

"But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg"(pg.23)

Gatsby thinks that by having a lot of money that he can buy the happiness. But the truth says that money can't buy love and happiness. Wealth also does not complete the American Dream which Gatsby looking for it. Money don't show reality, but rather fakeness. Money also cannot make one's life perfect.

Gatsby wants to change the past. He thinks that his money changes Daisy's mind. Daisy's words "Rich girls never marry poor boys" to Gatsby make him thinks that poverty is the reason behind rejected him when he was poor. That is why he makes good money to change his past. His dream to win his love and marry Daisy fails. Money isn't everything. It can't bring happiness. Having a lot of money and power can provide material and pride satisfaction in life, but it cannot achieve the real needs of the human heart, which is true love and genuine happiness. Achieving the American dream means having moral values instead of wealth and fortune. Greed also leads to failure. That is why the American dream of Gatsby fails.

"Can't repeat the past? 'he cried incredulously. Why of course you can! 'He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before, 'he said, nodding determinedly. She'll see "(pg.110).

At the end of the novel, there is a sense of hopelessness shows the death of American dream. The first sense is the death of Gatsby. It refers to death of American dream. The second

sense is Wilson's suicide. It gives a vivid portrayal of destroying the American dream. The first indication of tragedy begins at the introduction of the Buchanan's daughter. When the girl is brought into the salon Nick observes an obvious disturbance in Gatsby's attitude and thinking,

"Gatsby and I in turn leaned down and took the small reluctant hand. Afterward he kept looking at the child with surprise. I don't think he had ever really believed in its existence before." (Pg. 117)

Daisy then calls her child an "absolute little dream", crushing all of Gatsby's hopes of recreating the past. Then the replacement of the American dream with materialism is pointed out moments later when Nick and Gatsby try to distinguish the charm in Daisy's voice. At that moment Gatsby says.

"Her voice is full of money", and Nick reaches a revelation about society: "That was it. I'd never understood it before. It was full of money-that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it.... High in a white palace the golden girl...." (Pg. 120)

The failure of American dream begins at the moment of Gatsby's death. All the dreams fail when he dies on the pool. George Wilson is also an example of the death of American dream when he commits suicide, his dreams are failed. However the deaths of both the rich and poor man trying to achieve their goals symbolize the death of the old American Dream. The dream is now completely lost. Through the tragic story of Jay Gatsby and his failed attempt to reach his dream, F. Scott Fitzgerald also describes the tragic death of American values. The characters in *The Great Gatsby* are examples of Fitzgerald's message that the moral values which should be to achieve the American dream replace with possession of money and greed. Gatsby is one of the characters who replace his behavior just to make his dream without caring about the humanity.⁵

The laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool...The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of a transit, a thin red circle in the water! (pg.162).

Throughout the novel, the author shares his own experiences in the novel. By adding biographical features to the novel, Fitzgerald is able to give his novels that extra depth because the plot of the novel is more realistic and reflect the society of the times. The story in Fitzgerald's book contains basic ideas from his life, not necessarily actual events. Several characters have biographical characterization and the novel reflects their own experiences. *The Great Gatsby* includes many autobiographical features to enhance the themes of the work. Certain main characters like Daisy Buchannon, Jay Gatsby, and the narrator Nick Carraway are representations of actual people from Fitzgerald's life. Fitzgerald participates in the First World War. He sees the behavior of the people, and how they chase their dreams without paying attention to the moral values and the humanity. He reflects his own experiences in his literary works. ⁴

Symbolism plays a significant role in literary work. *Great Gatsby* is not free of symbols. The green light has a significant meaning which refers to the main idea of the novel that is the American dream. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is meaningful. It represents the hope

and the future of American dream. It also presents the love of Gatsby for Daisy. The author uses the symbolism in his novel to convey his message about the hope and achieving American. The green light also represents a love that is lost. This symbolism is explained in an earlier passage, at the gathering of Gatsby and Daisy: 7

“I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could barely fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (pg.180)

Conclusion

It can be said that what based on wrong cannot be true. Gatsby gives up his moral values, honesty and humanity. Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald shows how dreams are destroyed, no matter what the dreams consist of money, material status, or just simply to be happy. Fitzgerald also shows that the failure of the American Dream is unavoidable in a sense that nothing can be as perfect as one could imagine. Without hopes or dreams life would be empty, as shown by Tom and the Buchanan’s. The American Dream is something every person works for through his/ her life. The failure of the American dream can be represented by the main character of the novel. It is also can be said that Gatsby doesn’t make any success in his life, he doesn’t want to achieve the American dream and he just wants to marry Daisy. He thinks by having a lot of money that he can get her love. At the end of the novel, Gatsby is not satisfied with the course of his life, he lost his hope to have Daisy. In life, it is important that you have a sense of direction. Knowing where you want to be and what you want to achieve in your lifetime. In order to do this, one needs to truly understand himself. Knowing what makes you happy and understands your own definition of success. Reflection allows you to know yourself better and to grow up as a human being. If you can reflect, you will eventually find what they really want in life. No one really knows what they want out of life unless they spend enough time thinking about it and trying to figure out what really drives them to do their best in life.

References

1. Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America, by Marius Bewley.
2. Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretation, by Harold Bloom.
3. Trimalchio an Early Version of The Great Gatsby. James L. W. West.
4. Selected Bibliography, F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Great Gatsby.
5. Methods of Advanced Literary Studies. Dr. Scanlon. 2013.
6. Bloom, Harold, ed. Modern Critical Views: F. Scott Fitzgerald.
7. Fahey, William. F. Scott Fitzgerald and the American Dream.
8. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. New York. Simon and Schuster.
9. The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Gatsby3